

LAWRENCE COUNTY LIBRARIES

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Lawrence County, Indiana is probably best known for its limestone. Stone from its quarries has been used in such landmarks at the National Archives, the Empire State Building, the Pentagon, and the National Cathedral. But Lawrence County has another distinction as well.

Lawrence County is the home county to more astronauts than any other county in the United States. Three men, Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Charlie Walker, and Kenneth Bowersox, hail from here. The two public libraries in the county, located in Bedford and Mitchell, have created some special collections dedicated to the space pioneers.

Virgil "Gus" Grissom was one of the original seven Mercury astronauts and is undoubtedly the most famous of the three. He was born and raised in Mitchell, Indiana. Grissom was the first American to go into space twice. He was also one of the first Americans to die in the space program. On January 27, 1967, Grissom and two other astronauts, Roger Chaffee and Ed White, were killed in a launch pad fire while preparing for the first Apollo spaceflight.

Not surprisingly, the Mitchell Public Library focuses special attention on Grissom. His portrait hangs in tribute here. The library's Indiana room contains a collection devoted to Mitchell's favorite son. The collection features newspapers and magazines that explore Grissom's career from its beginnings. Of particular interest are copies of the hometown paper, the *Mitchell Tribune*, following Grissom's first spaceflight and other items of local flavor. The items do not circulate.

Examining the collection is somewhat like going through a family's treasured keepsakes. Amidst the room's local history books and microfiche readers is a plain cardboard box. The items inside are not organized in any particular way. There are tributes, projects, and magazines donated throughout the years by local students and Mitchell residents. Rather than detract, the informality of the collection actually enhances the experience of exploring Grissom's life, as he himself was known to be unassuming and modest.

Mitchell Public Library also has copies of several books pertaining to Grissom. Included in its collection is *Starfall* by Betty Grissom ("Gus" Grissom's widow) and *Henry Still; We Seven*, a collection of essays by the seven Mercury astronauts; and *Gemini: A Personal Account of Man's Venture into Space* by Grissom himself. This book was published just months after his death.

The other two Lawrence County astronauts, Walker and Bowersox, were raised in Bedford, Indiana.

Charlie Walker was born in Bedford and graduated from Bedford High School. He was a payload specialist with NASA and was on three space shuttle flights, spending a total of twenty days in space. Currently Walker works for Boeing and his mother still lives in Bedford, Indiana.

Kenneth Bowersox is also a graduate of Bedford High School. Although he has made several flights into space aboard the space shuttle, he became most well-known for being the only American left in space following the explosion of the Space Shuttle Columbia on February 1, 2003. Bowersox was one of three (and the only American) aboard the International Space Station at the time of the disaster. He spent 5 ½ months on the space station.

The Bedford Public Library gives equal attention to all three men in its collection. Each astronaut has a large three-ring binder devoted to his life and accomplishments. These three scrapbooks contain primarily local newspaper accounts of their respective trips into space as well as their journeys back home. There are also some rare personal insights into the men's lives. For example, the Walker scrapbook contains a personal letter sent to friends and family during Christmas 1984, shortly after his first space mission. Each of the scrapbooks circulates.

One could find more in-depth and perhaps better organized collections devoted to these three American astronauts. But nowhere but Lawrence County, Indiana, could someone find material that shows the personal side of these men as well as the affection their communities have for them.